

# **SHAHRISTANI'S KITAB AL-MILAL WA'L-NIHAL ON THE DUALISTS: TEXT, TRANSLATION, AND COMMENTARY**

## **Introduction**

The Kitab al Milal wa'l Nihal is a large text in Arabic written by the Sunni scholar Shahrastani and serve as a good historical testimony to what we could denominate as the "Chaldean dualist" sects, among these 'sects' he included some relatively familiar but officially proscribed religious communities like those of the Manichaeans, the 'gnostic' Mandaeans, and the eighth and ninth-century heirs of the sixth-century Zoroastrian reformer Mazdak among an intriguing roster of smaller and more obscure religious and social movements. We could recount the main characteristics of these gnostic movements as follows:

- 1.Elevation of Seth and Enoch as central figures particularly in their roles as bringers of Esoteric knowledge, lineage and salvation
- 2.Dualism between the spirit and matter, Light and Darkness and the mixture of both resulted in the creation of the world
3. Anticosmicism as the belief that the material world is hostile and opposed to the divine. Divinity not as the essence of this world, but its negation and cancellation.
4. Ascension of the soul so that the body is the prison of the soul, through gnosis one can escape from the material and elevate the soul towards the spiritual world
5. Initiatory system where the acolyte is initiated across the ranks and slowly receives esoteric knowledge as well as the existence of an spiritual elite among the believers that safeguard such knowledge
6. Cosmic Anthropos as the belief of an Adamic spiritual being which serves as humanity prototype or representation in the spiritual world and reflects material humanity
- 7.Letter mysticism as the belief in the mystical property of letters and their relation with the divine and its use in the role of creation and revelation

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## **Edition and English translation of THE DUALISTS**

Among the [possessors of the Book], there are the dualists, supporters of the two eternal [principles]. They affirm that Light and Darkness are both, from all eternity, eternal, unlike the Mazdeans, who profess the coming into existence of Darkness and narrate the circumstances. These dualists, for their part, profess that the two principles are equal in eternity, but differ in substance, nature, action, space, place, genders, bodies, and spirits.

### **[1.] The Manichaeans**

These are the followers of the sage Mani, son of Pattig. He appeared in the time of Šāpuhr, son of Ardašir, and was killed by order of Bahrām, son of Ohrmazd, son of Šāpuhr. This happened after Jesus, son of Mary (Peace be upon him!).

Mani created an intermediate religion between Mazdaism and Christianity. He affirmed the prophetic character of Jesus, but rejected that of Moses.

Muhammad b. Hārūn, known as Abū 'Īsā l-Warrāq, who was originally Mazdaite and knew the religion of these people well, reports the following 2bis. / According to the sage Mani, the world was made, composed from two eternal principles (one is light, the other, darkness), both of which, from all eternity, have not ceased and will not cease\*. Mani denied the existence of anything except from an eternal principle. He affirmed that the two principles are eternally endowed with force, sensitivity, perception, hearing, and sight. But as for the soul and form, as for action and its conduct, the two principles are opposed; and as for space, they face each other, like body and shadow. The following table highlights the substance and action of each. /

#### **Light**

1. Its substance is good, excellent, noble, pure, clean, sweet-smelling, and beautiful.
2. Its soul is good, noble, wise, beneficent, and knowledgeable.
3. Its action is good, integrity, utility, joy, order, cohesion, and concord
4. Its direction is upward. For most of them, it rises toward the North. But some affirm that it is on the side of darkness.
5. Its genera are five: four are bodies, and the fifth is their spirit. The bodies are fire, light, wind, and water. Their spirit is the breeze, which moves in these bodies.
6. The qualities [of light are] modest, good, pure, immaculate.
7. Some of them say that the universe of light has always been similar to our world: light has an earth and an atmosphere. / But the earth of light has always been subtle. It does not have the shape of our earth, but that of the body of the sun, and its rays are like the rays of the sun. Its smell is the best smell. Its colors are the colors of the rainbow.
8. According to some of them, there is nothing [there] that is not a body, and bodies are of three kinds: the earth of light (there are five)<sup>13</sup>; and another more subtle body which is the atmosphere <sup>14</sup>; / and another more subtle body which is the breeze, and this is the spirit of light.
9. Light, they say, has not ceased to engender angels, gods, and saints, not by way of coupling, but as wisdom is engendered by the wise, and orderly speech, by the reasonable man.
10. The King of that world is its spirit. Its world is gathered by good, praise, light.

## Darkness

1. Its substance is bad, deficient, low, murky, shady, stinking, and ugly.
2. Its soul is bad, low, foolish, evil, and ignorant.
3. Its action is evil, corruption, damage, sadness, disorder, breakage, and discord.
4. Its direction is downward. For most of them, it descends toward the South. But some affirm that it is on the side of light.
5. Its genera are five: four are bodies, and the fifth is their spirit. The bodies are darkness, simoom, and fog. Their spirit is smoke (it is called al-Hummāma), which moves in these bodies.
6. The qualities [of darkness are] shady, bad, impure, defiled.
7. Some of them say that the universe of darkness has always been similar to our world: darkness has an earth and an atmosphere. / But the earth of darkness has always been thick. It does not have the shape of our earth, but it is thicker and harder. Its odor is repulsive, it is the most stinking of odors. Its colors are the colors of blackness.
8. According to some of them, there is nothing [there] that is not body, and bodies are of three kinds: the earth of darkness; and another darker body which is the atmosphere; / and another more tenebrous body which is the simoom.
9. Darkness, they say, has not ceased to engender demons, archons, and devils, not by way of coupling, but as insects are engendered by unclean rottenness.
10. The King of that world is its spirit. Its world is brought together by evil, blame, and darkness.

The Manicheans then differ on mixture and its cause, and then on salvation and its cause.

Some of them say that light and darkness were mixed by a blind movement, by chance, not intentionally, by free choice. For most of them, the cause of the mixture is that the bodies of darkness became somewhat distracted from [harm] their spirit, which looked and saw the light. He then sent [his] bodies to mingle with the light. They accepted because of their eagerness for evil.

When the King of Light saw this, he directed one of his angels toward them in five fragments of his five kinds. The five light fragments then mingled with the five dark ones. Smoke joined the breeze: life and spirit in this world come only from the breeze, perdition and misfortune from the smoke. Fire joined fire, light joined darkness, simoon joined wind, fog joined water. Consequently, whatever is advantageous, good, and blessed in the world comes from the kinds of light; whatever is harmful, evil, and corrupt in the world comes from the kinds of darkness

When the King of Light saw this mixture, he ordered one of his angels to create this world according to its structure, so that the particles of light would emerge from the particles of darkness. The sun, the moon, and the other stars are only in motion to remove the particles of light from the particles of darkness. The sun removes the light that has mixed with the demons of heat, and the moon removes the light that has mixed with the demons of cold. / The breeze that is on the earth never ceases to rise, for it belongs to it to rise towards its world Likewise, the particles of light always rise and rise, while the particles of darkness always descend and fall, until the former are freed from the latter, the mixture disappears, the aggregates are broken up, each particle reaches its whole and its world: the resurrection and the return, that is it.

The freeing, the separation and the elevation of the particles of light are helped, they say, by the hymns of glorification, the acclamations of holiness, good words and pious works: with this, the

luminous particles rise in the pillar of dawn to the moon's sky, and the moon does not cease to receive them from the beginning to the middle of the month. Then it becomes a full moon, and pours them back / to the sun until the end of the month. The sun pushes them 30 towards a higher light, and they progress in that world until they reach the supreme pure light. This operation continues until, in this world, nothing remains of the particles of light, except a small concentrated residue that the sun and the moon cannot purify. At that moment, the angel who carries the earth will rise and the angel who holds the heavens will release them. What is above will fall on what is below. Then, a fire will be lit so that the top and the bottom will burn. They will remain ablaze until the light they contain is released: the duration of this blaze will be one thousand four hundred and sixty-eight years.

The sage Mani, in chapter Aleph (One) of his Gospel and at the beginning of Šāpuhragan, says that: "The King of the world of light is in all his earth: nothing is empty of him," / and that: "He is visible and hidden, and has no end, except on the side where his earth borders on the land of his enemy." He also says that: "The King of the world of light is in the very center of his earth."

He mentions that: "The eternal mixture is the mixture of heat, cold, humidity, and dryness. While the mixture introduced into existence is [that of] good and evil."

Mani imposed on his followers the tithe on all possessions, four ritual prayers of day and night, the intimate prayer to the God of truth, abstention from lying, murder, theft, fornication, avarice, magic, and idolatry, and [the rule] of not doing to an animate being that which one would not like to suffer the like of.

As for the Laws and the Prophets, his belief was as follows. The first whom God (exalted be He!) sent with knowledge and wisdom was Adam, the father of mankind. Then [God sent] Seth, then Noah, then Abraham, then He sent Buddha to the land of India, Zoroaster to the land of Persia, Christ (the Word of God and his Spirit) to the land of Byzantium and the West, and Paul (after Christ) to the same. Then the Seal of the Prophets will come to the land of the Arabs.

One of their leaders, Abu Sa'id the Manichean, asserts that, from the mixing until his time, that is, the year 271 of the Hegira [= 884], 11,700 years have passed, and that 300 years remain before salvation: for the duration of the mixing is 12,000 years according to his doctrine. Of this duration, there would therefore remain fifty years at the current date, that is, in 521 of the Hegira. We are therefore at the end of the mixing and the beginning of salvation. From now until universal salvation and the dissolution of the aggregates, only fifty years remain!

## **[2.] The Mazdakians**

These are the followers of Mazdak. He appeared in the time of Kavād, the father of Anōšarvān. He called Kavād to his doctrine, who responded favorably. But Anōšarvān learned of his shameful imposture: he had him searched for, seized him, and had him put to death.

According to al-Warraq, the Mazdakians' doctrine on the two fields of being, the two principles, is like that of many Manicheans, / except that, according to Mazdak, light acts intentionally, by free choice, while darkness acts according to a blind movement, by chance: light is endowed with knowledge and sensitivity, darkness, ignorant and blind. And the mixture occurred by chance, according to a blind movement, not intentionally, by free choice. Likewise, salvation is achieved by chance, without free choice.

Mazdak forbade contradicting one another, hating one another, fighting one another. And since this most often happens with regard to women and property, he gave license over women and property, and put them in common for men, like water, fire, and fodder.

It is reported that Mazdak ordered killing to save souls from evil and from mixing with darkness.

His doctrine on the principles and elements was that there are three: water, earth, and fire. When they mingled, the ruler of good and the ruler of evil came into existence: what was pure in the elements was the origin of the ruler of good, what was turbid in them was the origin of the ruler of evil.

It is reported that the object of his worship sits on his throne in the upper world, in the same way that Hosrow sits in the lower world. Before him are four powers: discernment, understanding, guarding, joy, as before Hosrow are four people: the mobadān mobad, the great herbad, the chief of the army, the musician.

These four [dignitaries] govern the world through seven [personages] who are inferior to them: the prefect (sālār), the chamberlain (pēšgāh), the... (bālvān or barvan), the... (parr-āvar?), the expert (kār-dān), the minister (dastvar), the servant (kōdag).

These seven revolve within twelve "Spiritual beings":

1. The one who is lying down [hābanda; 2°, Taurus, often represented at rest].
2. The one who gives and The one who receives [dihanda wa sitānanda; 3°, Gemini]. /
3. He who cuts [or pinches: buranda; 8th, Scorpio].
4. He who eats [hūrandā; 4th, Cancer].
5. He who devours [daranda; 5th, Leo].
6. She who gleans [činanda; 6th, Virgo].
7. The one who weighs [kašanda; 7°, Libra].
8. The one who shoots [the arrow: zananda; 9°, Sagittarius].
9. He who digs [with his foot: kananda; 10°, Capricorn] .
10. The one who gives water [abdih; 11°, Aquarius].
11. -The one who slides [or swims: suranda; 12°, Pisces].
12. The one who stands firm [pāyanda; 1°, Aries].

Any man in whom these powers (the four, the seven, and the twelve) are gathered has entered from this lower world into the sphere of the divine, and religious obligation no longer applies to him. He said that the Hosrow of the upper world governs simply by the letters whose sum is the supreme Name. Whoever conceives something of these letters, the Great Mystery opens to him. But whoever is excluded from them remains in the blindness of ignorance, forgetfulness, stupor, and sadness, unlike the four spiritual powers. They are divided into groups: the kūdakiyya, the muslimiyya, the mähāniyya, the sapidgāmagān. The kūdakiyya are found in the regions of Ahwāz, Persia and Šahrazūr. The others, in those of Sogdiana of Samarqand, Šāš and īlāq.

### [3.] The Bardesanites

These are the followers of Bardaysan. They affirm the existence of two principles: light and darkness. Light does good intentionally, by free choice; darkness does evil by nature, under

compulsion. What is good, useful, sweet-smelling, and beautiful comes from light; what is evil, harmful, stench-ridden, and ugly comes from darkness.

According to them, light is alive, endowed with knowledge, autonomous power, sensitivity, and perception; and from it come movement and life. / Darkness is dead, ignorant, powerless, frozen, inanimate, without action and without discernment; and evil comes from it by nature, stupidly

They assert that light is of one kind, and that darkness, likewise, is of one kind. The perception exercised by light is a harmonic perception, for its hearing and sight and other senses are one thing. Its hearing is identical with its sight, its sight is identical with its [other] senses, and one speaks only of hearing and sight because of the difference in composition, not that they are in themselves two different things. According to them, color is identical with taste, smell, and touch. That it is found to be color comes only because darkness has allied itself to it in a certain way, / that it is found to be a taste, because darkness has allied itself to it in a different way. And the same is true for the color, taste, smell, and touch of darkness

They affirm that light is entirely whiteness and that darkness is entirely blackness. They affirm that light has never ceased, on its lower side, to encounter darkness, and that darkness has never ceased, on its upper side, to encounter light. They differ about mixture and salvation.

1. For some of them, the light penetrated the darkness while the latter met it with roughness and harshness. The light then suffered because of the darkness, and wanted to refine and soften it, then free itself from it. / This does not suppose a difference in their genus, but it is like the saw: its genus is steel, its flat is soft, but its teeth are rough. [Similarly,] softness belongs to the light, roughness to the darkness, and both are of a single genus. It is by its softness that the light insinuated itself into these interstices, but this would not have been possible without this roughness. For it is not conceivable that one can attain the perfection of one's being otherwise than by softness and roughness.
2. For some of them, on the contrary, it is darkness which, by cunning, succeeded in clinging to the light by its underside. The light then made an effort to free itself from it and push it back, so much so that it leaned on the darkness and sank into it, like a man who wants to get out of the mire into which he has fallen: he presses on his foot to get out, and sinks further. It therefore takes time for the light to be able to free itself from the darkness and isolate itself in its world.
3. For some of them, finally, the light entered freely into the darkness only to amend it and extract from it the particles suitable for its world. But when the light entered, the darkness clung to it for a long time, and the light began to commit injustice and evil by constraint, not freely. If it had remained apart in its own world, pure good alone would have come from it: there is a difference between what one does by constraint and what one does freely.

#### **[4.] The Marcionites**

These are the followers of Marcion. They affirm the existence of two eternal and opposite principles: one is light, the other is darkness. They also affirm the existence of a third principle, the median moderator\*: this is the cause of the mixture, because the two opposite principles, in their mutual aversion, mix only through the median.

They say that the median is, in rank, inferior to the light and superior to the darkness. Our world resulted from gathering and mixing. / According to some of them, there was no mixing except between the darkness and the moderator, for he is closer to it. It mixed with him to be comfortable there and enjoy his pleasures. The light then sent to the mixed world a Christ-like spirit (masihiyya) (this is the Spirit of God and his Son), out of pity for the healthy moderator who had fallen into the net of the accursed darkness, to save him from the bonds of the Devil. Whoever follows [the Christ-like Spirit], does not have relations with women and abstains from fatty meats, escapes and is saved. Whoever opposes him is lost and perishes

"If we affirm the existence of the moderator," they say, "it is because light, namely God (may He be exalted!), cannot mingle with the Devil. Moreover, the two opposing [principles] have by nature a mutual aversion, / and exclude each other by everything themselves: how can we admit that they come together and mix? Therefore, a mediator is needed who stands below the light and above the darkness, and through whom the mixture is produced."

This is contrary to what the Manichaeans say. Bardesanes, it is true, is older. But Mani, in taking his doctrine, opposed him regarding the moderator. This is also contrary to the doctrine of Zoroaster For he affirms the opposition of light and darkness, while [Marcion] affirms that the moderator is like a judge between the two adversaries, joining the two opposites: his nature and substance therefore cannot come from one of the adversaries. But it is God (to Him be the power and the glory!) who has neither opposite nor equal.

Muhammad b. Šabīb reports, concerning the Bardesanites<sup>91</sup>, that, according to them, the moderator is the man endowed with sensitivity and perception, since he is neither pure light nor pure darkness. / He reports from them that they regard marriage and all that it entails as an advantage for the body and the spirit, and refrain from slaughtering animals because of the pain it inflicts

It is reported from a group of dualists that light and darkness have always been alive. But light is endowed with sensitivity and knowledge, while darkness is ignorant and blind; light moves with an even and rectilinear motion, while darkness moves with a hurried, clumsy, and tortuous motion. While this was happening, a Hummāma of darkness assailed one of the edges of the light. This one swallowed a piece of the darkness out of ignorance, not intentionally or knowingly, but like the child who cannot distinguish the ember from the date. This was the cause of the mixture. / The Great Light then organized salvation. It built this world to save the light that had mixed with it: it could save it only by this organization.

### **[5.] Kantheans, Fasters, Followers of Transmigration**

According to a group of dialectical theologians, the Kantheans affirm that there are three principles: fire, earth, and water. Beings came into existence from these principles alone, and not from the two principles affirmed by the dualists. Fire, by its nature, is good and luminous; water is the opposite by nature. What is good in this world comes from fire, what is evil comes from water, and earth is intermediate.

These people are very fanatical about fire: it is superior, luminous, subtle; nothing exists except through it, nothing subsists except through its action. Water is contrary to it by its nature and activity. Earth holds the middle ground between the two. Thus, the world is composed of these principles

As for those who fast, they abstain from the pleasures of subsistence and devote themselves to the worship of God: in their acts of worship, they turn toward fires out of veneration for them. They also abstain from marriage and slaughtered animals.

As for the followers of transmigration, they profess the transmigration of spirits into bodies, and their passage from one individual to another. The rest and labor, the ease and misfortune that a man encounters are the reward of his previous life<sup>100</sup> in another body, in retribution [for his actions]. / Thus, [the life of] man always has two dimensions: the action, or the retribution. Either he receives the sanction of works he has previously done, or he performs works for which he must await the sanction: Paradise and the Fire are here below, in the body of each one. The summit of 'Ilīyyūn is the degree of prophecy, and the lowest level is the degree of the serpent. There is neither existence higher than the degree of the prophetic mission, nor existence lower than the degree of the serpent. But others among them say that the higher degree is that of the angels, and the lower degree is that of the demons.

By this doctrine, the followers of transmigration oppose themselves to the other dualists: for the latter, by "the days of salvation" [of which they speak], understand the return of the particles of light to its noble and praiseworthy world, and the perpetual abode of the particles of darkness in its vile and blameworthy world.